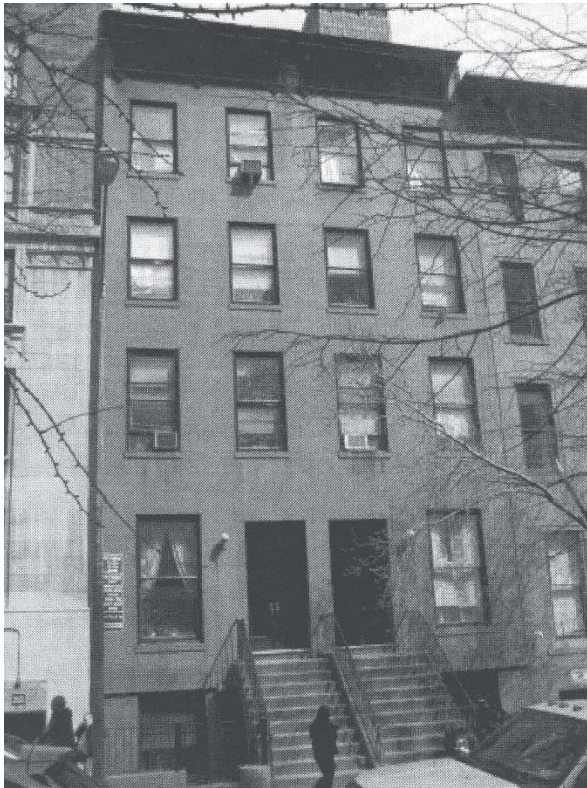


1927 Decrypted October 15

This is a year-end report --- for 1927;

1927 was a memorable year in the United States. Charles Lindbergh flew his airplane *Spirit of St. Louis* across the Atlantic. Since nobody prior to him had ever made this trip by airplane non-stop and solo, he became the very first *Time Magazine* Man of the Year. The New York Yankees, managed by Miller Huggins, put together one of the best baseball teams ever, sweeping Donie Bush's Pittsburgh Pirates 4-0 in the World Series. President Calvin (Silent Cal) Coolidge (30th president, 1923-1929), while on an extended vacation in the Black Hills of South Dakota, would famously announce that he would not run for reelection in 1928.



A modern photograph of the building in which Yardley's Black Chamber was located in 1927.

But what was going on in the world? If you look at the codebreaking targets of Herbert Yardley's Cipher Bureau for that year, you would have somewhat of an idea — or at least what the United States cared about at the time. Yardley, a frequent topic of CCH's History Today, ran MI-8 (aka the Cipher Bureau or, later, the Black Chamber), a clandestine codebreaking organization in New York City operated by both the State Department and the Army. The following is a summary of what his office was able to accomplish in the year 1927 (submitted in Yardley's January 1928 report):

His office handled 732 messages of which 219 were decrypted, while 513 were still being worked. The numerical breakdown by target nation was: Japan 428, China 175, Russia* 79, Mexico 39, Nicaragua 11.

Moreover, as reported by Yardley, MI-8 could read 16 systems (Mexican 5, Chinese 4, Japanese 3, Nicaraguan 3 — 1 Japanese partially read), with another 16 were still under development (Mexican 11, Japanese 3, Chinese 1, Russian 1). Most, but not all, of these were diplomatic systems.

There was no accompanying documentation explaining how or why a certain nation became a collection target (what we would probably call a collection requirement today). It is also possible that collection was based somewhat on convenience, i.e., focusing on more available systems. But the collection targets made great strategic sense as well. Based on Yardley's statistics, one can conclude that Japan and Mexico were our primary diplomatic targets. By this time (the late 1920s), Japan was a growing regional threat to the United States in Asia. Tensions with Mexico had been constant since its 1911 Revolution brought political and social unrest to the country (it is not a surprise that Germany sought a WW I (1914-1918) alliance with Mexico against the United States). Mexico, on the U.S. southern border, would attract attention anyway.

The other three are less obvious. China in the late 1920s was chaotic as the Nationalist Party, headed by Jiang Jieshi (aka Chiang Kai-shek) was attempting to unify the nation by force. An unfortunate repercussion of Jiang's effort, known as the Northern Expedition, was strong anti-Western feeling in China. There had been a revolution in Russia at the end of WW I which had ended centuries old czarist rule, leading to the creation shortly thereafter of the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet Union was not a direct threat to the United States yet, the international socialism it espoused was. The last nation on the list, Nicaragua, piqued U.S. interest because of the Nicaraguan Revolution of 1926-1927. U.S. Marines, as a result, would be deployed to Nicaragua to help restore order there.

All of these targets, except for Russia, were 1926 targets. Peru, interestingly, was a 1926 target but did not make the 1927 list. Of interest as well is what countries were NOT being targeted by MI-8. These include such notables as the British Empire nations (to include Canada on the U.S. northern border), France, Germany, and Italy.



Herbert Yardley

Finally, Yardley explained MI-8's unsatisfactory performance against Mexico (11 unbroken systems), noting that in many cases all his organization had to work with was a small sample of a certain system. He predicted that these Mexican systems could be broken with better collection. Interestingly, in his 1926 report, he commented on the difficulty of the Nicaraguan system, opining that it was based on a Spanish commercial code. Since 10 of the 11 Nicaraguan messages worked in 1927 had been broken, his team had apparently figured things out.

*It might or might not be significant that Yardley said "Russian" instead of Soviet. The White Russians, supporters of the old czarist system, were still legitimate rivals of the Soviet regime during the late 1920s. On the other hand, many Americans then --- and for half a century after --- often said "Russia" when they meant the "USSR."

502 captions: photo 1: a New York City brownstone, seen from across the street; photo 2: a portrait photograph of Herbert Yardley.